

STEP-BY-STEP JOURNEY FROM MINDFULNESS TO CESSATION

JHANA TRAINING MANUAL



HOW TO GO BEYOND MINDFULNESS
ON MEDITATION RETREATS

Tomas Piskacek

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Title: Jhana Training Manual: Step-by-Step Journey from Mindfulness to Cessation

Author, publisher, producer: Tomáš Piskáček, Šestajovice, Czech Republic, 2025

First edition, April 2025, version 1.0

Website & contact: www.jhana.training

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ISBN 978-80-11-06662-8

Foreword

Are the Jhanas and states beyond truly within reach? It depends. With the right guidance, patience, and dedication, the answer is yes. This manual is for serious meditators seeking to cultivate profound states of concentration and bliss within the focused environment of a retreat.

Drawing from both early Buddhist texts and practical experience, this book offers:

- Practical retreat guidelines to optimize one's meditation schedule
- Step-by-step instructions for developing deep Samadhi
- Strategies to overcome common obstacles in concentration practice

Whether embarking on a silent retreat or refining one's mindfulness practice at home, this guide serves as a trusted companion on the path to deeper stillness—laying a strong foundation for the development of wisdom.

This is the book I wish I had when I began my journey 30 years ago.

Venerable Ariyadhammika Mahathera
Leader of the Sangha of SBS Monk Training Centre, Malaysia



Perspectives from Meditation Researchers

The *Jhana Training Manual* provides a comprehensive and no-nonsense introduction to the practice of jhana. The book avoids theoretical discussion, and yet draws on recent research on jhana. This creates a balanced presentation of the jhanas while focusing on how to actually experience these profound states of blissful peace.

Tomas shares some unique “tricks of the trade” that may help open up access to jhana. The writing is straightforward and represents condensed wisdom. There are also numerous interesting phenomenological details on how both jhana and cessation unfold. Indeed, the parts on the cessation of perception and feeling should not be underestimated.

The book contains complete instructions for one way of entry into nirvana—I can recommend it with the greatest confidence.

Terje Sparby, PhD
Professor of Philosophy and Meditation Researcher
Oslo, Norway

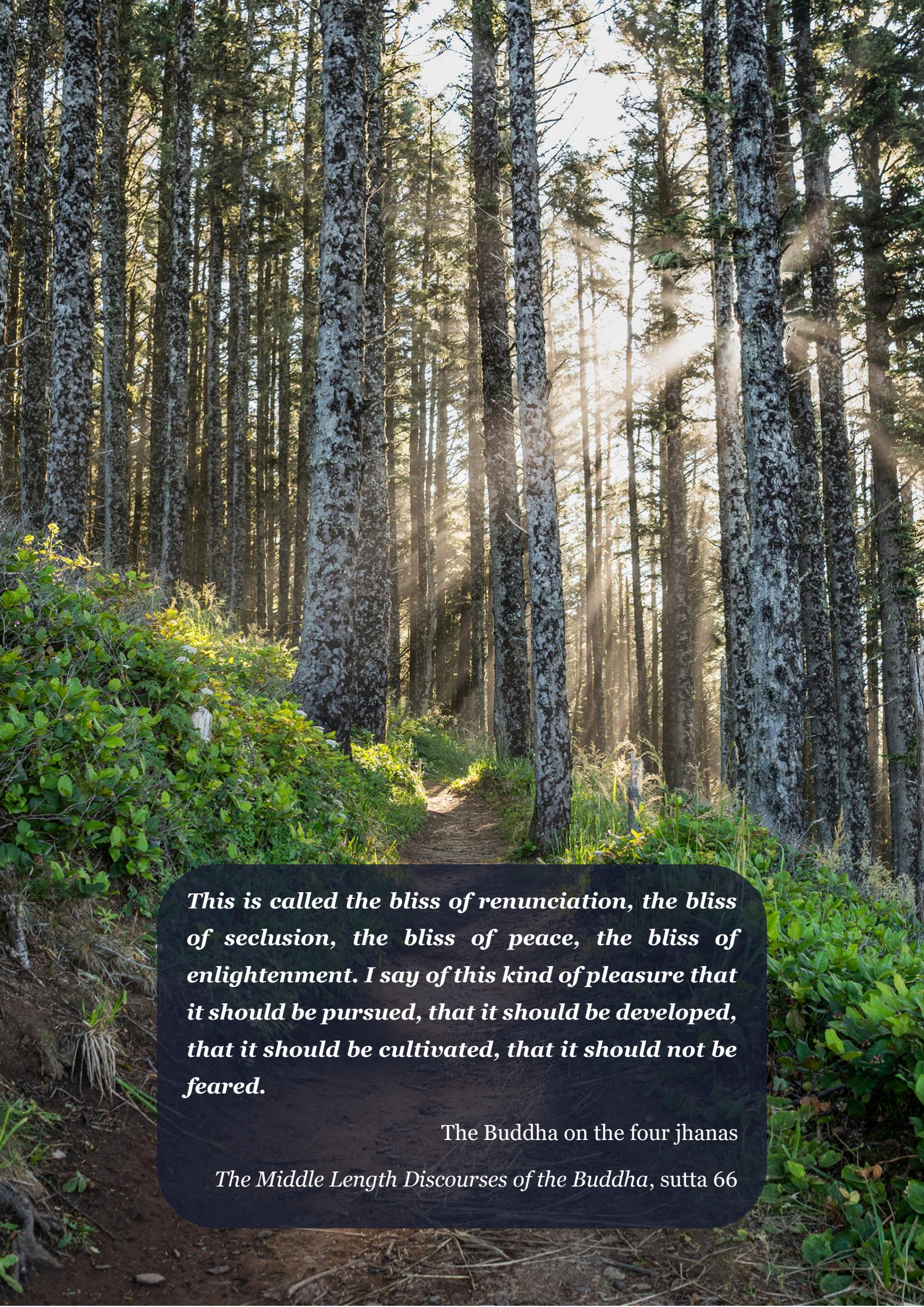


The *Jhana Training Manual* is a rare and masterful contribution to the landscape of contemporary meditation literature. Tomas Piskacek brings precision, humility, and lived insight to one of the most elusive and misunderstood areas of contemplative practice. This manual is not merely theoretical—it is forged in the crucible of deep retreat, rigorous training, and hard-won personal realization. Grounded in the early Buddhist suttas, yet refreshingly practical and accessible, it offers clear, methodical guidance for meditators seeking to traverse the full arc of deep absorptive practice.

Whether you are a beginning practitioner or an advanced contemplative, this manual provides indispensable tools for unlocking the depths of the human mind and heart.

David R. Vago, PhD
President, International Society for Contemplative Research





This is called the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of peace, the bliss of enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, that it should not be feared.

The Buddha on the four jhanas

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, sutta 66

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This manual includes practical advice for the following meditation practices:

TABLE OF MEDITATION TECHNIQUES/ATTAINMENTS

Type	Attainment	Meditation Technique/ Attainment
Mindfulness	0	Walking
		Long/short breath awareness
		Experiencing the whole body
		Tranquilizing the bodily formation
Jhana	1	First jhana
	2	Second jhana
	3	Third jhana
	4	Fourth jhana
Formless (absorption)	5	Infinite space
	6	Infinite consciousness
	7	Nothingness
	8	Neither perception nor non-perception
No conscious experience	9	Cessation of perception and feeling (<i>Nirodha samapatti</i>)

Introduction

About the manual

What is it?

This manual provides comprehensive practical guidance for developing the jhanas (profoundly serene and blissful states of meditative concentration), potentially all the way to the cessation of perception and feeling (*nirodha samapatti*)—the highest meditative attainment possible according to the early Buddhist scriptures. The basis for developing the jhanas is the practice of mindfulness of breathing. The guidance is based on my personal experience with all the meditative states discussed in the manual.

The early Buddhist texts are the scriptural basis for the meditative states—the nine attainments (four jhanas, four formless attainments, and the cessation of perception and feeling). Specifically, it's the *Sutta Pitaka*¹—the “suttas” (for the sake of simplicity and consistency with the quoted suttas, I omit diacritics for the Pali² terms; the Pali terms are in italics, except for the frequently used terms “jhana,” “samadhi,” and “sutta”).

However, even the suttas say that the Buddha himself learned to enter some of the states (the seventh and eighth attainments of the nine) before awakening from other ascetics.³ That means these meditative states are not reserved for Buddhists only and can be practiced separately from the Buddha's teaching. I aim to provide practical advice on developing the meditative states, not to delve into the Buddha's doctrine beyond what is necessary for the meditation training. Whether it is used secularly or as part of the Buddhist Eightfold Path is up to the reader.

¹ “Basket of Discourses”—canonical texts of Theravada Buddhism.

² The language of the Theravada canonical texts.

³ *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, sutta 26.

I include the most relevant information that may help progress towards and through the nine meditative attainments. The manual focuses on mind training in a retreat setting, covering both the time on and off the meditation cushion. I do not claim that following the approach here will make everyone enter the jhanas. I do claim, though, that if met with some other factors (see the Theory chapter for details), it can lead one all the way from mindfulness, through the jhanas and formless attainments, to the cessation of perception and feeling—*nirodha samapatti*.

Who is it for?

The manual is suitable for anyone (laypeople, monks, or nuns) aspiring to go beyond basic mindfulness on a meditation retreat. Beginners can start by practicing mindfulness of breathing as described here at home and use it as a basis for their first meditation retreat in the future. Intermediate practitioners with retreat experience can use the tips here to fine-tune their training and progress further. Expert meditators already mastering the formless attainments can see whether the tips for getting from the neither perception nor non-perception to the cessation of perception and feeling will work.

The training is tailored to developing deeper meditative states on a retreat. However, if you do not plan to go on a meditation retreat, you can still use the mindfulness of breathing techniques for your mind practice outside of a retreat setting.

The manual does not take into account the potential mental health issues of the meditator. I don't have any professional education in that area. The instructions assume the meditator is generally in good health. For such individuals, I'm not aware of any potential health risks associated with the practices described here. If you have a relevant health condition, it is advisable to discuss the suitability of attending a meditation retreat with a healthcare professional.

Why did I write it?

The nine meditative attainments have changed my life. These states cannot compare to anything experienceable in everyday life. Calling them the utmost meditative bliss, peace, and release is not an exaggeration. I want to make them more accessible to others—that is my mission. The training is not easy, and making it to jhana is not guaranteed. But it's undoubtedly worth trying.

Overview of chapters

PART 1: GROUNDWORK FOR SERENITY

- **Chapter 1—Theory:** Clarifies the key terms used throughout the manual and discusses the key factors for attaining jhana.
- **Chapter 2—Training Outside of Meditation:** Covers all relevant aspects of the meditation retreat practice outside of formal meditation, including a suggested daily retreat schedule.
- **Chapter 3—General Meditation Tips:** Practical advice relating to any level of meditation.
- **Chapter 4—Mindfulness Training:** Provides meditation instruction for three modes of mindfulness of breathing, the third one potentially culminating in the first jhana. Includes a table with an overview of the mindfulness of breathing techniques.

PART 2: ADVANCED MEDITATION

- **Chapter 5—Jhana Training:** Walks the reader through the practice of the four jhanas, lists their benefits, and provides a table summarizing the jhana practice. Realistic timeframes for getting into the jhanas are also discussed.

- **Chapter 6—Beyond Jhana: Formless Attainments:** Explains the meaning of the “formless,” provides instruction for transitioning from the fourth jhana to the formless absorption, and continues the journey through the meditative attainments to the edge of conscious experience.
- **Chapter 7—Cessation of Perception and Feeling (*Nirodha Samapatti*):** Detailed elaboration of the highest meditative state, including tips for attaining it, my first experience of emerging from it, some features and effects of the cessation practice (e.g., nonduality), and ways to check for oneself that the cessation is happening.
- **Chapter 8—General Notes:** Closes the meditation discussion with final thoughts and tips on the samadhi⁴ training, especially on overestimation.
- Each chapter ends with a few key takeaways. **Summary of Key Takeaways** follows the **Conclusion** of the manual.

Chapters 2–4 will be the most practical for most meditating readers. Part 2 (chapters 5–8) deals with advanced mind training requiring more extended retreat periods. Therefore, Part 1 (chapters 1–4) will suffice for mindfulness practitioners who are unconcerned about the advanced meditation stages. Finally, chapter 7—Cessation of Perception and Feeling—might be the most interesting for readers curious about advanced meditation, as accurate information on the cessation attainment is scarce.

Who is the author of the methods described in the manual?

The approach described here is my method in the sense that it’s how I’ve practiced and what has worked for me. But it’s not my method in the sense that I would be the sole original author of it. It is based on the suttas; I learned most of the meditation instructions from my teacher—Venerable Ariyadhammika Mahathera; some things are probably common knowledge in the Theravada meditation circles, passed on to me by others, and the rest are my inventions.

⁴ Unification of mind, one-pointedness of mind; the next chapter explains the term in more detail.

Some of the tips may seem obvious to experienced meditators. I still include them as the aim is to provide a comprehensive manual helpful to beginners and advanced practitioners alike.

About the author

My name is Tomas. I was born in Prague, the Czech Republic, in 1987. I grew up playing tennis (and I see some parallels between training to be a professional athlete and training to attain the most profound states in meditation). I studied economics and public policy at Kenyon College (BA, Ohio), the London School of Economics, and the University of Amsterdam (MSc). Among my few jobs, I spent the longest time at McKinsey & Company in Prague as a research analyst. I also enjoyed teaching economics part-time at a high school.



I became interested in Buddhism when I was 16 and started meditating at 18—about 20 years ago. During my studies and work, I sometimes meditated at home and used to go to a 10–14-day retreat once a year, usually with Bhante Sujiva as a teacher (Mahasi meditation method).

At the end of 2018, I went to Sasanarakkha Buddhist Sanctuary in Malaysia to become a Theravada monk under the guidance of Venerable Ariyadhammika. At that time, I didn't consider myself an especially good meditator. Long sits were uncomfortable for me (hip and knee pain), I tended to think a lot (one of my past teachers put me in the “obsessive thinkers” category), and after a few days of retreat, my mind was easily overcome by lust. The beginnings at Sasanarakkha were no different.

However, quite unexpectedly, I was able to get into the jhanas and even the formless attainments relatively quickly. Later, in 2022, again at Sasanarakkha, I managed to

break through into the cessation of perception and feeling. After that, I maintained and developed the cessation practice for over two years.

Besides Malaysia, I have practiced meditation in Buddhist monasteries in Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Singapore.

At the end of 2024, I decided to abandon formal monasticism, return to Europe, continue my meditation practice without the monk robes, and dedicate myself to helping others on the path to jhana. I could not do it the same way as a monk since monks are not allowed to report their attainments to laypeople. Also, I delight in forest seclusion and the cessation of perception and feeling, but I cannot say the same about formal monasticism.



I don't expect all the information in the manual to be useful for everyone. But I believe most readers aspiring for the jhanas will find some valuable tips here. Sometimes, the game changers are relatively minor things. Read on to find out what the little trick was for me to break through into the cessation of perception and feeling.

Key Takeaways

- ★ **“This manual provides comprehensive practical guidance for developing the jhanas (profoundly serene and blissful states of meditative concentration), potentially all the way to the cessation of perception and feeling (*nirodha samapatti*)—the highest meditative attainment possible according to the early Buddhist scriptures.”**
- ★ **“The manual focuses on mind training in a retreat setting, covering both the time on and off the meditation cushion.”**
- ★ **“The manual is suitable for anyone (laypeople, monks, or nuns) aspiring to go beyond basic mindfulness on a meditation retreat.”**